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AUTHOR Lindemann, Erika
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ABSTRACT

Outside evaluators of a writing program can assess the program's effectiveness, can support the work in a program that has become visible and subject to criticism, are easier to listen to than local faculty members, and can help clarify and resolve conflicting notions members of the department may have about the program's reason for being. First, evaluators are likely to look at curriculum, teacher training, program administration, and support services administered outside the department. Second, evaluators may suggest improvements in the program, addressing problems that were mentioned before the visit or that came up consistently during the evaluation. Third, evaluators may comment on controversies--not taking sides but helping the discussion to go on constructively. (A guide for planning an evaluation visit is included.) (TJ)

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Evaluating Writing Programs: What an Outside Evaluator Looks For

Erika Lindemann

As a rule, we evaluate writing programs because an institution requires periodic assessments of its instructional programs, because an administrator requests it, or because we want to satisfy ourselves that students receive the best writing instruction we can give them. In many colleges, evaluation remains an in-house affair. The argument against soliciting advice from outside evaluators runs something like this: They're an unnecessary expense. We'd have to squeeze one or two honoraria and some travel money out of an already tight budget. Then, we'de need to reserve one or two days in a hectic semester for their visit and arrange a few phoney socials so that everyone can smile a lot and say nice things about the program. And how will we keep the evaluators away from Professor X, who never says anything constructive about anything? Isn't it wiser to solve our problems by ourselves? Besides, how can an outsider learn enough about the program in a few days to resolve issues we've been discussing for years? These questions convince many faculty members that outside evaluators can't make a significant contribution to improving a writing program. Unless the dean insists, forget it.

As one who has directed a writing program and evaluated two others, I don't believe outside evaluation should be optional, not if we are to assess our writing programs thoroughly and honestly. The questions I have just raised don't really concern the cost of bringing in outsiders, or their competence to advise us, or the rights of faculty "to solve our problems by ourselves." Rather, the objections mask a human reluctance to be evaluated. We don't want to hear adverse criticism of our work, to open doors which let in--my god--an expert who might discover our

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shortcomings. Our defensive postures notwithstanding, outside evaluators serve a useful function. Their written reports obviously represent one kind of information which, together with other data, can help us assess the program's effectiveness, and until we know more about evaluating the teaching of writing, we would do well to base programmatic decisions on as much information as we have time to collect and patience to interpret.

Outside evaluators also support our work in a program that has become visible, public, and often controversial. Everybody notices the writing program these days. English faculty, who teach more composition courses now than they did five years ago, expect to shape the program. Department heads and deans give the writing program a substantial portion of the budget and want it spent wisely. Faculty outside the department often wish the program would decrease its emphasis on literature and prepare prospective engineers, lawyers, and business executives for the kinds of writing required in those professions. Finally, legislators and the public expect the writing program to solve the literacy crisis. They don't think we're doing very well, and they hope we'll do better without its costing too much. Some will condemn the program no matter what we do, but others would support us if they knew how. If they seem to offer simplistic solutions to our problems, it's because they don't understand more complex alternatives. And when we describe how complicated the writing process is, how difficult teaching someone to write well is, they sometimes interpret our explanations as excuses.

Perhaps because outside evaluators have no special reason to defend the writing program, our colleagues and administrative officers find them easier to listen to than the folks at home. Personalities and past confrontations can't tangle the issues, and most people seem to make an effort to be cooperative and courteous in talking with the evaluator, who is after all an invited guest on their campus. For whatever reason, outside evaluators usually command the attention of college

administrators, faculty, and even the public. Outside evaluators may say what you've been saying all along, but in repeating the message, they reinforce your position, especially among colleagues who may have stopped listening to you. In supporting those who understand what the goals of a writing program should be, outside evaluators also help educate faculty and administrators in other departments, encouraging them to pursue their legitimate interests in the program constructively.

Besides developing support for the writing program in other departments, outside evaluators help clarify and resolve conflicting notions which members of the English department may hold about the program's raison d'etre. Outside evaluators are thoroughly familiar with their own writing programs, of course, but they also know how programs at other institutions function. They read rhetorical theory and research; they teach writing; they discuss their work at professional meetings. As evaluators, their primary intention is not to transform your writing program into one like theirs. Rather, they assess a particular program more or less objectively, determining its unique strengths and weaknesses, using what they know to improve it. They recognize that it must retain its individual character, serve a particular group of students, solve special problems, but they hope to exercise their best professional judgment in helping you move the program forward. If your department resembles mine, most of your colleagues, innocent of recent developments in the field, fail to understand why some changes in the program seem desirable. Many do not read research in the theory and teaching of writing or attend professional meetings which specifically address the concerns of writing teachers. An outside evaluator helps educate these members of the English faculty, helps them discover alternative ways of viewing the writing program and resolve questions which research has already answered. As a resource, the evaluator can discuss with your English colleagues what's happening at other institutions, what we know about teaching writing, even what we have yet to learn.

If you do decide to invite a consultant or two to your campus to evaluate your writing program, what can you expect them to do? What will they be looking for. Well, that depends--on the size and nature of the program, on whom you invite, on what you want their advice about. I can't speak for all outside evaluators, but I can tell you what I look for, having evaluated two quite different programs and requested a review of the one I directed. I emphasize four areas: the curriculum, teacher training, program administration, and what I call "support services" or those resources, like libraries, which support writing instruction but are administered outside the English department.

Curriculum: In evaluating the curriculum, I try to determine in advance of my visit what holds the program together, what philosophy of composition the department supports. By philosophy I don't mean something like "we want our students to write effectively." I want to know how the department hopes to realize this commendable goal, and why. Why does the department think students need to write well? How does it define "writing well"? What is its definition of a "well-written" product? What theories of discourse, or discoursing, or pedagogy inform the writing program? Without a consistent rationale, everything else about the program is likely to appear chaotic and patched together.

Beyond assessing the program's underlying rationale, I ask other questions of the curriculum: How much writing do the students and their teachers do? Is there a logical fit between courses in the program? Do texts and instructional materials match course objectives and students' abilities? Is the program serving students throughout the institution instead of assuming that all freshmen will become English majors? How are students placed in or exempted from writing courses? How large are individual sections of the course? Can students readily discuss their work individually with instructors? With other students? What audiences do students write for? Do they know what standards apply when their work is

evaluated? How serious a problem is grade inflation and what might account for it? I try to determine provisional answers to these questions before I come to campus, reviewing whatever written documents those who requested the evaluation have sent me. Then, I draft questions and comments to discuss with students, faculty, and administrators during my visit.

Teacher Training: More and more English departments want to improve the quality of teaching in writing courses, and I want to encourage their efforts as much as I can. As a rule, I review the opportunities for professional development available to three groups of teachers: graduate teaching assistants, part-time faculty, and fulltime faculty. According to Claude Gibson's "The CEA 1978 National Survey; Business as Usual: Write, Write, Write" /The CEA Forum, 9(October 1978), 3-9/, about one third of the 486 institutions surveyed staff writing courses with graduate students. Since many graduate students begin their teaching careers in writing programs, and since they will teach writing for several years (at least) once they find fulltime jobs, we ought to provide rigorous training for them. As a consultant, I want to know how the department guides, supports, and evaluates the development of graduate students as teachers, especially during their first year of teaching. Does the department offer an orientation program, an apprenticeship or mentor system, workshops? What graduate courses in rhetoric, linguistics, and pedagogy are available to beginning teachers? Among institutions that staff writing courses with teaching assistants and that do offer a graduate course in teaching writing, only 59% require the course according to the CEA survey. I favor that requirement and would like to see it broadened to include a graduate course in teaching literature. I also support informal arrangements which bring graduate students and faculty together to discuss teaching problems, as well as efforts to encourage graduate students to develop conference presentations which apply what they are learning in their graduate courses to the classroom, and vice

versa. However substantial a department's efforts to train beginning teachers may be, graduate students are not likely to participate enthusiastically in their own professional development if they are overworked and underpaid. Consequently, as an outside evaluator, I want to know, in addition to what sorts of training the department offers graduate students, how much they earn, how many writing students they teach, and how many graduate courses they are expected to take while they are teaching.

Part-time faculty teach writing courses in 70% of the schools CEA surveyed. Members of this underground portion of our profession generally walk softly, uncertain whether or not their contracts will be renewed, unable to shape decisions which affect them. When I evaluate a program that relies heavily on the "rent-a-teacher system," I try to explore ways the department can improve its commitment to part-time faculty by giving them opportunities to continue their professional growth and a voice in matters which concern their teaching. I would also want to discuss with departmental administrators strategies for reducing the number of part-time instructors over a period of time.

Efforts to decrease part-time staff, tightened budgets, and reduced upper-division enrollments require departments to assign a greater number of writing courses to fulltime faculty who may neither be prepared to teach writing nor have much enthusiasm for the assignment. This development calls for another kind of teacher training, requiring greater tact and predicated on the assumption that fulltime faculty view themselves as "already educated." Some faculty, of course, respond well to compelling arguments that departments redirect their resources toward lower-division courses. Others, frustrated and fearful, attempt to avoid teaching freshmen with sometimes-nasty evasion maneuvers. Outside evaluators pose questions which may help departments mitigate these agonies and lessen the angst our colleagues in literature feel when "demoted" to teaching writing: How many

faculty already teach writing? Do the department head and other respected leaders among the faculty teach writing? Could they be persuaded to? Are teaching assignments equitably distributed among all faculty ranks? Does the department offer incentives to encourage and reward faculty participation in the program? Or does it assign freshman courses to punish the disfavored, the unpublished, the powerless, or the young? Can faculty retrain themselves without feeling threatened or incompetent? Would they attend informal seminars led by their colleagues or presentations offered by outside "experts"?

Outside evaluators can help faculty members sort out emotionally-charged arguments about teacher training and retraining. They can encourage administrators to state their expectations clearly, firmly, and humanely, to reward those who willingly agree to teach writing, and to fund programs which encourage a writing teacher's continued growth.

Program Administration: In evaluating the third area, program administration, I try to determine who makes decisions affecting the program. That's difficult, because paper documents don't always reveal the important political contexts which shape almost all educational enterprises. Public postures notwithstanding, I want to know who finally exercises the greatest clout. In about 14% of the schools CEA surveyed, the department head, with or without the aid of a committee, oversees the writing program. 62% of the schools designate a special supervisor to administer the program. 68% of these program directors hold the Ph.D.; 81% of them are on the tenure track. If these statistics hold true nationwide (they may not; the CEA surveyed only 486 institutions), I'm a little concerned. More than 30% of all writing program administrators may not hold the doctorate, and almost 20% may not be in tenure-track positions. Furthermore, being in a tenure-track position does not mean that the program director has tenure. Writing program administrators without tenure need protection, not only because they must devote considerable time to the job and must speak with authority to faculty, administrators, and the

public, but also because they often find themselves at the center of complex, controversial issues. If the department head or dean abandons them, if no job description specifies how their administration of the program figures in promotion and tenure decisions, their future in the department looks bleak. As an outside evaluator, I want to examine the kinds of "protection" the program director enjoys, so that we won't lose competent young professionals who accept an important position but then are denied tenure or advancement because they couldn't find time in a sixty-hour week to publish twenty articles.

How curricular decisions are made is important too. I want to know if those responsible for the writing program frequently confer with faculty and administrators outside as well as within the department. If a committee supervises the program, are its members appointed or elected? Do they represent all who teach in the program, including graduate teaching assistants and part-time faculty? Does the committee or the program director elicit suggestions about courses, texts, and program policies? Do students have opportunities to evaluate their courses and instructors? Are grievance procedures for students and teachers fair and consistently applied?

Support Services: Most successful writing programs cultivate mutually sustaining relationships with ESL, honors, minority students programs, with reading, writing, or study skills centers, with bridging or remedial courses. Testing centers help us assess our students' reading and writing abilities; computer centers compile enrollment statistics and tally course evaluations; libraries offer orientation lectures, research paper workshops, and special assistance to teachers. When I evaluate a program, I ask about these support services. Is the program using all of the institution's resources to enhance writing instruction? Are teachers, administrators, and staff working cooperatively to fulfill the institution's primary mission: serving students? Are faculty in other departments encouraged to support and improve writing instruction?

Since many a college draws its entering freshman class largely from local high

schools, the writing program itself can also function as a support service for the teachers in those schools. We should visit them often, not to criticize overworked, underpaid teachers, but to commend what they are doing right and well, to offer our help in improving writing instruction at all educational levels. As a rule, I do not award demerits if a writing program neglects its feeder schools; those who oversee a writing program must help their own students first. But if the program also serves the larger educational community, so much the better. Those cooperative ventures gain special praise in my evaluation report.

When I evaluate a writing program, then, I look first for what works well in each of these four areas: curriculum, teacher training, program administration, and support services. I look for elements of the curriculum that realize respected theory and practice, programs that encourage excellence in teaching, procedures that effect responsible and responsive decisions, and efforts that urge cooperation among all sorts of professionals who want to help students write effectively. Second, I suggest improvements in the program, addressing problems I've been asked to investigate or that persistently recur in talking with teachers, students, and administrators. Some changes I broach informally, in conversation. Others, especially those which teachers themselves feel powerless to implement, need whatever force my written report might give them. Third, I comment on controversies, recognizing that dedicated professionals sometimes disagree about the best way to move a program forward. In my written report I discuss such differences of opinion as objectively as I can, sometimes outlining a few compromises, always recommending continued, constructive debate until the faculty accepts its own comfortable stance on the issue. Avoiding controversy would be irresponsible, especially if it threatens the program, but, as an outsider, I cannot resolve controversy merely by siding with one faction or another. So, I hope to keep the dialogue going constructively after I leave the campus.

In some ways, I find, evaluating a writing program is much like rewriting an

essay. Some faculty members, like student writers reluctant to condemn what had previously satisfied them in a draft, refuse to discover new lines of thought which would improve the writing program. Other faculty members, like students who presume that everything in the draft is flawed, assume any alteration in the program improves it. "They are," as Quintillian characterizes compulsive revisers, "like doctors who use the knife even when the flesh is perfectly healthy. The result of their critical activities is that the finished work is full of scars, bloodless, and all the worse for their anxious care." An outside evaluator, much like a skillful teacher of rewriting, must encourage a re-vision of the writing program, not necessarily to correct it but to make it an honest expression of the best collective thinking its teachers and students wish to live by. As with revision, we may discover through outside evaluation that parts of the program are out of order, that new material could be incorporated, that some practices ought to be questioned and perhaps discarded. We may even realize that we have misjudged our audience of writing students. Outside evaluators assume the dispassionate view that pencils have both an eraser and a writing point. They help us decide both what parts of the program need revising and what elements remain sheer poetry, justifying our satisfaction.

Guide for Planning an Evaluation Visit

1. Discuss the entire procedure with your department head or dean. Determine in advance what you expect of the evaluator, how much the visit will cost, and when it will take place. The program director should be consulted, but his or her superior should bear ultimate responsibility for the visit.

2. Submit a list of potential consultants. Note their areas of expertise; estimate air fares for bringing them to campus. WPA can suggest possible consultants; contact Professor Winifred B. Horner, Department of English, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri 65201.

3. The dean or department head may ask your help in drafting the letter of invitation. Be sure it specifies what you want the evaluators to do, what the honorarium will be, and when you want the written report.

4. Prepare the agenda. Evaluators usually want to discuss the program with faculty, part-time staff, teaching assistants, program administrators, the freshman committee, the department head, and the dean (perhaps also other departmental or university administrators). If the evaluators request it, reserve time for talks with students or non-English faculty with special interest in the program. Give each group an opportunity to voice opinions without fear of later reprisals; for example, faculty should not be present when the evaluators meet with teaching assistants. Schedule discussions with the highest ranking administrators toward the end of the visit, and give the evaluators some free time, so that they can collect their thoughts, digest comments, compare notes, or reread evaluation materials.

5. Mail the evaluation materials. Do not overwhelm the evaluators with documents

they cannot conveniently synthesize. The following materials would be helpful:

a. A self-study report recommending changes the department wants to implement
b. Tallies for evaluation questionnaires completed by teachers and students
c. A copy of the college catalogue together with descriptions, syllabi, or guidelines for the courses in the writing program
d. A list of texts and other instructional materials
e. A description of placement and exemption procedures
f. A description of grading criteria
g. Materials pertaining to orientation meetings, workshops, graduate courses, and other teacher training programs
h. Statistical information for the previous and current academic year: enrollment, class size, composition of the teaching staff, final grade distributions
i. Vitae for the program's director(s)
j. The agenda for the evaluation visit

6. Arrange hotel accommodations; reserve comfortable meeting rooms; locate a large coffee pot; find people to meet the evaluators at the airport, escort them to each meeting, and take them to dinner. Delegate these responsibilities to other teachers, not to an already overworked secretary, so that you are relatively free to handle unforeseen problems.